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### Entertaining politics, seriously?!

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# Negotiation games

Play metaphors in the  
journalist-source relation-  
ship between political PR  
and talk shows



## 4

The relationship between politicians and talk show producers is a tense one. Politicians need to cooperate with journalists to reach and hopefully persuade potential voters. Journalists try to get prominent politicians on their show or in their newspaper and complain about the extended public relations (PR) industry that hinders direct contact with such politicians. Although political PR initially was an Anglo-American phenomenon, partly because of the two-party system in the United Kingdom and United States, it recently gained more ground in other political systems, such as the Dutch pluralistic system (Aalberts and Molenbeek 2010; Brown 2011). In fact, it is so much part of the regular news business nowadays that it is not considered news itself (Luyendijk 2010). Recent research has shown, for instance, that PR advisors, spokespersons, and spin doctors far outnumber parliamentarian journalists in the Netherlands, and greatly influence what could become political news and the manner in which this is framed (Prenger et al. 2011).

Although journalists dislike this dependency, they do find these close relationships necessary for their work (Prenger et al. 2011). As a result of cutbacks on news services and the concurrent rise of a

24/7 demand for news, journalists are facing an expansive workload and are incapable of taking on every newsbeat single-handedly. To provide a constant news-stream, they are increasingly dependent on information subsidies provided by PR departments and political figures, who provide news in easily manageable tidbits. Politicians can use this much sought after information to barter for media attention (Jones 1996; Davis 2009; Brants et al. 2010; Davis 2013). This exchange is often initiated or controlled by PR advisors, marketeers, and spin doctors, who try to create a positive image of the party or politician, acting as “parajournalists,” attempting to steer the news in a certain direction (Mancini and Swanson 1996; Savigny 2008; Schudson 2011; Davis 2013).

This illustrates that the journalist–source relationship is under great pressure - and thus news services too (Davis 2007; Broersma, Den Herder, and Schohaus 2013). Recent research on the relationship between journalists and politicians has shown that they are entangled in a power struggle in which the power is constantly shifting (Franklin 2003; Davis 2013; Van Praag and Brants 2014). Studies on PR often discuss negotiations between politicians and journalists in general terms or focus on specific cases, such as election campaigns, in which power struggles and negotiation positions severely differ from regular news (Prenger et al. 2011; De Haan et al. 2013; Bakker et al. 2013). In addition, this general approach leads to a lack of attention for the conventions of specific formats. Types of contact and the negotiations involved in dealing with hybrid formats, such as talk shows, have not yet been scrutinized. This omission is remarkable since talk shows, which provide the opportunity to tell personal stories and reach a broad audience, are of great interest to politicians. They play an increasingly important role in political marketing and strategy. Therefore, the negotiations and perceptions with regard to these shows bear closer scrutiny.

Moreover, the point of view of the PR advisors on this particular

genre has yet to be taken into account. Whereas politicians are the ones who appear on the shows, PR advisors conduct the negotiations for these appearances on their behalf. This study aims to shed light on how PR advisors frame their own role in their contact with talk shows, leading to the following research question:

*Which interpretive repertoires do political PR advisors use to describe the preparations for and negotiations with talk shows?*

For this study, a qualitative interpretive repertoires analysis has been conducted of 10 semi structured interviews with PR advisors, supplemented with information from 11 interviews with politicians and journalists. Although interview content cannot be taken at face value, the way interviewees respond and describe their actions can provide insight into their own position in the field (Potter and Wetherell 1987; Costera Meijer 2005). Discussing these repertoires, used to frame their own practices and opinions, reveals that PR advisors often use the play metaphor to describe their contacts with talk shows. The analysis of two specific forms of this metaphor, competition game and stage play, will unveil underlying structures in their relations with journalists and therefore add to the field of study of journalist–source relationships.

### **The Backstage Power Game between Journalists, Politicians, and their PR Departments**

The journalist–source relationship lies at the heart of journalism and has therefore been a frequent object of study. In his classic study of newsroom practice, Gans (1979) described this relationship as an ongoing “tug of war,” in which power and control easily shift between the two sides. Nowadays, this “state of flux” of power relations is considered characteristic of this relationship see e.g. (Blumler and

Coleman 2015). Journalist–source relations have therefore frequently been compared to a game (of power) (see e.g. Corner and Pels 2003b; Habermas 2006; Entman 2007). Deriving from Huizinga’s (Huizinga 1955) study on the role of play in culture, the game or play metaphor is commonly used in various fields of journalism research

(Corner and Pels 2003a; De Vreese and Elenbaas 2008; Aalberg, Strömbäck, and De Vreese 2011). According to Huizinga, elements of play are part of and shape numerous aspects of society and culture, for example in law or the arts, but also in politics. This theory implies that “playing is a medium where lived experience is organized as a structured situation” (Rodriguez 2006). Players know the rules of the game and behave accordingly.

Caillois ([1961] 2001), further developing the theory of play and exploring its complexity, distinguished between four forms of play. Two of them are of interest for this study as they are found as repertoires of PR advisors: Agon, or competition, and Mimicry, i.e. mimesis or roleplay.<sup>1</sup> While in Agon the rules and the way the game is played are determined by fighting against each other and using strategies to win, Mimicry focuses on playing together, instead of as opponents. Roleplay can only succeed when all players join in and perform a play together, for instance in theater. Before analyzing how these two forms of the play metaphor are used by political PR advisors reflecting on journalism, their use in different fields of research will be discussed.

#### *Agon: Competition between Talk Shows Producers and PR Advisors*

In studies of political news coverage, especially of campaign strategies and election coverage, the strategic game frame, including horse race, game, and strategy frames, is one of the key concepts (Patterson 1993; De Vreese and Elenbaas 2008; Aalberg, Strömbäck, and De Vreese 2011). Predominantly, but not exclusively, in election

campaigns media tend to cover political news as a competition with winners and losers (horse race and game frame) and attempt to reveal the strategies for winning the elections (strategy frame). In these strategies PR departments play a significant role behind the scenes. Whether it is called PR, communications, or consultancy, the aim of these departments is clear: to have strict control on political communication (Barry-Hirst 2005; Yaxley and Theaker 2011).<sup>2</sup> While highlighting specific aspects, they hide others and try to control journalistic access to newsworthy information and/or restricted areas, and the framing thereof (Brown 2011; Davis 2013; Bakker et al. 2013).

Studies on how politicians and PR advisors attempt to influence power relations with journalists have shown that they use news management and political marketing to influence the communication process. Often analyzed from a political-economy angle, news management has a long tradition in the United States and the United Kingdom, where it was professionalized along similar lines. Both countries largely have a two-party system, which makes it easier to frame election campaigns as a game with a clear winner and loser (Gaber 2000; McNair 2004; Brown 2011). In the Netherlands, media management has increased immensely in politics since the 1990s (Brown 2011; Prenger et al. 2011; Van Weezel 2011). Because the country has a multi-party system which often leads to coalition governments, the hard-hitting and personal campaigns known from the United States and the United Kingdom are not common in Dutch political culture. Parties will very likely have to work together after the elections and too vicious a campaign would prevent this cooperation (Wijffes and Voerman 2009; Brown 2011; Voltmer and Brants 2011).

In studies of news production, increasing attention has been paid to the negotiation processes between PR advisors and journalists. As Prenger et al. (2011) have shown, PR departments try to maintain direct contact with producers and reporters in order to make



agreements about topics and publication dates, and use off-the-record briefings and controlled information leakage to influence the content. “Public relations have emerged as a hidden form of ‘information subsidy’ for news and parts of the entertainment media,” Davis (2013, 92) explained in his analysis of the effect of promotional cultures on information supply. A study on the negotiations between politicians and media during the 2012 Dutch election campaign has shown that in preparation for televised debates, agreements are made about content, logistics, and other guests. The latter are the source of most tension, whereas almost no deals were made on content or form of the debates (De Haan et al. 2013).

Those negotiations become more complex as more broadcasters and programs compete for guests for their shows (Broersma, Den Herder, and Schohaus 2013; De Haan et al. 2013). Therefore, it is not only necessary to analyze the competition at stake, but also how it is framed as such by participants in the game. As Huizinga (1955) already noted, to study a game, players’ experiences must be described, as they reveal structures and norms of the game. Therefore, this study will focus on how PR advisors describe their own role in the strategic game of negotiations with talk show producers.

### *Mimicry: Performing the Play in an Authentic Way*

Besides research on newsroom practices, another strand of research on journalist–source relations focuses on the output, the journalistic texts (Davis 2009; Broersma, Den Herder, and Schohaus 2013). Here, the actual interaction between interviewers and interviewees has been examined, usually on (live) television, or during official and institutionalized settings, like press conferences. The struggle to gain or retain power over the conversation has often been the focal point, frequently studied using a conversation analysis approach (e.g. Clayman and Heritage 2002; 2007), or from a political communication angle (e.g. Van Praag and Brants 2014; Brants and Van Praag 2005).

Despite this struggle, both parties—politicians and journalists—need to cooperate to create a successful media appearance. Here, the other form of the game metaphor, performing a stage play, has frequently been used, especially in research on political style and rhetoric. Viewing politics as a stage play could renew people's interest in politics, since it makes routines easier to understand and debates more interesting to follow, due to the fact that politicians must know the rules of the theater routines and simultaneously come into contact with the audience (Corner and Pels 2003a). On the other hand, this metaphor can have a negative connotation, implying that political style has become more important than content (Pels and Te Velde 2000).

Talk shows are an interesting case in this field, because they combine detailed preparation with seemingly spontaneous talk, resembling the preparations for and performance of a stage play.<sup>3</sup> It is the illusion of a spontaneous appearance that needs detailed orchestration behind the scenes. With its appeal to intimacy and immediacy, the talk resembles normal conversations, but it is always “highly planned and structured within the limits of the talk show format and practice” (Timberg and Erler 2002; Davis 2013). The various talk show formats provide different opportunities for politicians to extol their message and construct a favorable image of themselves (Van Zoonen and Holtz-Bacha 2000). The longer interviews in such shows are not only used to spread ideas, but are also harnessed in a strategic sense as “marketing device” (Van Zoonen and Holtz-Bacha 2000; Baym 2005, 272).

In contrast to current affairs or news programs, talk shows provide ample opportunity to show private interests and emotions, which politicians and their PR advisors consider crucial to reach a broader electorate that decides on the basis of personalities (Corner 2000; Van Zoonen, Coleman, and Kuik 2011). This could be a way to reach voters with a low interest in politics or no party affiliation

(Brown 2011). In order to create a trustworthy impression, politicians have to present a complex image of personal and political qualities (Coleman 2011). They have to show political knowledge and competence, but at the same time share intimate details regarding personal qualities so that they can be judged as authentic personalities (De Beus 2011).

Like in a stage play, an authentic performance is crucial for politicians. Cooperation with other players—as well as thorough preparations—are required to create a convincing, seemingly spontaneous performance that disguises the rehearsal involved. As Goffman already noted in 1959, the interaction between journalists, politicians, and their advisors and assistants behind the scenes determines, at least partly, the performance on stage, visible to the viewer (Goffman [1959] 1984). This study will show how PR advisors describe their own role in these preparations, using two different parts of the play metaphor.

## **Method**

Because interviews provide a constructed reality, influenced by the interviewees' opinions and background, as well as the social setting created through the interviewer's presence, this method has proven very fruitful with regard to studying participants' thoughts and self-perceptions (Silverman 2001; Gubrium and Holstein 2002; Fontana and Frey 2005). Even if participants do not tell the truth or alter versions of events to their advantage, this does not mean that interviews are useless for research purposes. On the contrary, they reveal how interviewees want to be perceived and therefore how they themselves would prefer their role to be (Fontana and Frey 2005). Interviews, therefore, may not reveal information or facts about specific events or situations, but they provide insights into participants' interpretations and their discourse about a specific topic (Warren

2002). As this research focuses on the perception and self-perception of PR advisors, interviews are the most useful method to reveal their thoughts and interpretive repertoires on participation in talk shows and the related negotiations.

For this research, interviewees were purposively selected to reflect the heterogeneity of Dutch political culture. This approach allowed almost the entire political party spectrum to be covered. All major political parties, with a single exception (the populist Party for Freedom—Partij Voor Vrijheid—refused to take part) were included, only a few small splinter parties did not respond to the request. The sample consists of 10 interviews with PR advisors: 6 of them representing opposition party leaders and Members of Parliament (MPs) and 4 were with government members from both governing parties. Additional interviews with journalists and politicians from different parties (11) were not included in the actual analysis, but did inform the interviews and helped interpreting the PR advisors' utterances.

The interviews were conducted between August 2014 and February 2015 by the first author. They lasted between 27 and 90 minutes and were recorded and fully transcribed. The interviews were semi-structured, following a topic list focused on PR advisors' perception of negotiations with talk shows, their own role therein, and their preferences for talk show appearances. This approach ensured that the main topics were discussed, but it also gave respondents the opportunity to bring up their own topics and examples. To stimulate spontaneous and personal responses, the interviewer asked the respondents to describe their perceptions in their own words, only probing when necessary to keep the conversation going. Respondents could thus bring to the fore what they considered important. Although they mentioned specific Dutch shows as examples, they did not make a difference between evening, late night, or morning talk shows in their use of repertoires, therefore the genre talk show is discussed in general in the results.

The interview transcripts were analyzed using the qualitative software Atlas.ti, starting with inductive coding. This allowed the author to establish and verify whether any consensus existed regarding perceptions, and how broadly such notions were agreed upon. Coding was guided by the research aim of gaining better insight into the role of PR advisors in the negotiation process between talk shows and politicians, resulting in broader families which were used to structure this article: the relationship with producers, the message, authenticity, understanding the formats, negotiations and agreements, preparation, training, and, finally, the specific role of PR advisors.

To find underlying structures in the interviews, an “interpretive repertoire analysis” was conducted (Potter and Wetherell 1987). In this method, repeatedly used metaphors, figures of speech, and modes of explanation are examined. They not only reveal the kind of language and terms that are used, but also the way PR advisors interpret their own role and their relationship with journalists: “repertoires do not merely describe a situation, they also produce evaluations, position individuals and groups, and construct, rationalize and naturalize ‘reality’” (Costera Meijer 2005, 28; cf. Potter and Wetherell 1987). This kind of analysis thus reveals the “common sense” of members of a specific group, which they use to manage their position in any interaction with other groups and from which “accusations and justifications can be launched” (Wetherell 1998). In the analysis, two repertoires were found in nearly all interviews: competition game and stage play. These dominant repertoires were further analyzed and consecutively traced down in the literature review. This enabled us to compare the PR advisors’ statements with earlier research. In the results section, representative quotes for the interpretive repertoires that were used in (nearly) all interviews are used to exemplify found patterns.

As stated in the introduction, the relationship between politicians, their PR advisors, and journalists is a tense one, characterized

by hidden strategies, with varying interests on both sides. Therefore, it was agreed that the interviews would be anonymous. No names of persons or parties are mentioned, and political positions or appointments are only mentioned in a general sense. Although there were no major differences between PR advisors of the various parties in how they applied the distinctive repertoires, we refer to them, for a deeper understanding of the provided quotes, as follows: OL1, 2, 3...(large opposition party, 10 seats or more); OS1, 2, 3...(small opposition party, 5 seats or less); G1, 2, 3...(governing party).

## **Results**

A metaphor almost all PR advisors used during the interviews is that of play. Using two different aspects of this metaphor as repertoires—competition game and stage play—the PR advisors managed to combine aspects of competition as well as cooperation without sensing any contradiction. The competition game repertoire enables PR advisors to frame the relations in a positive, sporting way, not allowing them to act harshly or take hard action. There simply are winners and losers, so you have to know the rules to win the game, and in the next round, or the next media appearance, you can start all over again. The interviewees used gaming jargon, such as referring to television programs as different players in the field, calling important politicians main actors and talking about winning and losing when explaining how successful or unsuccessful a talk show appearance had been. The use of this frame reveals that strategies and preparations are also interpreted as simply part of the game, meaning that it is clear to those who know the rules how they should respond. The use of the stage play repertoire, on the other hand, gives PR advisors the opportunity to explain their understanding of an authentic performance. In both repertoires the notion of training or preparations is crucial. Remarkably, PR advisors of all categories, governing or

opposition, large or small parties, have used the same repertoires locating their power position in the field, therefore implicitly confirming statements of PR advisors of other categories. In the following section, the use of these two repertoires will be discussed.

### **Competition Game Repertoire:**

#### **Rules, Negotiations, and Preparations**

##### *Rules of the game*

For a successful appearance on a show, PR advisors have to know the specific characteristics of a format, the rules of the specific game. The most important reason to appear on a talk show is the ability to purvey one's message to a wide audience, as all PR advisors agree. The success of such an appearance is therefore, at least in part, measured by whether politicians succeed in getting their message across. The message is adjusted to the kind of program and if possible a specific program is purposely chosen for a specific message. For difficult topics, they prefer a serious, fact-driven current affairs program with a one-on-one interview. For plans on societal matters, a talk show with other guests is chosen, because the interaction with others can help to emphasize one's viewpoint.

They are very much aware of the tone, the kind of questions, the host's interview style, and preferred topics and kinds of guest. This allows them to prepare politicians for the specific setting, which not only includes preparations regarding the content, but also elements concerning the form: interview duration, use of pictures and videos, and studio setting. Knowing the rules also makes it easier for PR advisors to prepare topics to fit into a format. They attempt to second-guess the producers and ask themselves what it is they would find good television. They are well aware that the better they adjust to the format, the greater the likelihood that the producers will accept their topic(s).

“You have to know how journalists make their choices, what they find interesting, what they don’t like, that saves you a lot of energy. If you try to sell something to a program although you know that the viewer won’t like it, because it is too technical or too difficult, it will cost you a lot of time and won’t gain you anything.” (G1)

One of the most important rules is fair play. Critical questions, for instance, are considered part of the game, but they have to be fair. The same goes for a live interview that develops spontaneously in a different direction than intended, which is particularly the case on talk shows, because they are perceived as much more unpredictable than news or current affairs shows. It is seen as part of the game as long as no intentional cheating is involved. PR advisors and journalists know that they will need each other again sometime soon and then the cards will be shuffled anew. Only when the rules of the game are really broken, when politicians have been misled, for example, and agreements have been ignored, relations get distorted and sometimes even permanently broken. But this does not happen very often, because both sides know that there are boundaries, be it implicit ones.

“You know how the other works, what the interests are, so you understand why one does what he does, but it has to be played clean. It is not clear where the boundaries are, unconsciously you have to feel them out every time, but both sides know they exist.” (G2)



*Strategies how to win*

The competition game repertoire not only serves to describe the field, but is also used to legitimize strategies and preparations. A PR advisor compared this process with a football match:

“If you are the coach of a football team, then it is obvious that you tell your team against whom they have to play. It is also obvious to look up the players of the team and what their strengths and weaknesses are. This does not mean that you know in which direction the ball will roll or that you can decide how the play will go. It is a profession and within this profession a talk show with 1 million viewers is top sport. You have to prepare this. You would not take the voter seriously, if you didn’t ... Anyone would find it strange, if the coach of the Dutch national soccer team Louis van Gaal were to have said during the World Cup: “I don’t know against whom we are playing tonight. I’ll see.” (G3)

If they want to “win” they have to know the possible risks of an appearance on a talk show. So the main strategy is to avoid surprises, which are mostly uncomfortable situations created by unpredictable guests, questions, or video fragments. One thing all PR advisors try to avoid, for example, is a confrontation with individual stories of misfortune. They know that their politician can never “win” against, for instance, a single mother with a handicapped child that does not get the required care. For a politician to say “I cannot help you” in public would be a great blunder.

“It is difficult if not impossible to prepare for those individual cases ... We do an extra detailed check on what our party members have done about this topic, because

on a talk show you always will get the question, you are a politician, what can you do for her? And this is a difficult question, as we always talk about general policy and never about individuals. There are always people who end up between a rock and a hard place and those are the most interesting for the media, I even understand that.” (OL3)

Strategies to prevent these kinds of situations involve keeping close contact with producers in the preparation process, demanding to know who the other guests are, and what direction they are planning for the interview. Sometimes politicians are advised not to engage in a topic or activity. The example of former Labour Party leader, Job Cohen, who danced the conga on a morning show, was often mentioned as an example of what to avoid, not only for the act itself, but also because it was shown over and over again in other programs.

Another surprise PR advisors try to avoid is the confrontation with video fragments. Those short clips often contain earlier statements of the politicians themselves, their fellow party members, or their opponents, and are likely to conflict with the politician’s current story. PR advisors know that they cannot force producers to refrain from showing them, but they demand to see them before the show, so that they can prepare an answer with their politicians. When it comes to the other guests, PR advisors always check whether they can contribute to the topic or, instead, could endanger a successful appearance with radical perspectives or unpredictable actions. In the last case, appearances on a show are often canceled. The greater the likelihood of interaction between guests is in a program, the stricter PR advisors are in the negotiations about other guests.

The definite choice to appear on a specific talk show is a combination of all conditions and possible risks. Those are weighed up against the range of the program, the ratings, and the possible target

audience. The bigger the program, the greater the temptation to go regardless of the specific format, but on the other hand, this also increases the impact of a possible blunder. The more time they get for their message and the more exclusive their interview is, the more they are tempted to take the possible risk of an invitation.

### *Hidden game of power*

The players' position in the game determines how much power they have. How much PR advisors can ask depends very much on the position of the politician or party they represent, which was confirmed by all interviewees, PR advisors and journalists alike. PR advisors of small parties admit that they are not the programs' first choice and have to work harder to get media attention. The same goes for opposition parties. The more power a politician represents, the more interesting he or she is for talk shows, since they are the ones who influence decisions and changes. PR advisors are well aware of this.

“A minister is the highest person who makes policy, and we don't go to talk shows every other week. So if you can get the minister you have to give the floor to him.”  
(G4)

Only the most desirable politicians and their PR staff are in a position to ask this. Most advisors, especially to MPs, have to be happy with what they can get, as the competition for appearances on talk shows is fierce. The fact that politicians often only get one chance to show their ability to perform on a talk show increases the pressure even more. If their first appearance is unsuccessful, producers tend not to invite them again anytime soon.

So, behind the positive narrative told in the interviews lies a fiercer battle, which is only mentioned implicitly. Most PR advisors have to work hard to get their politicians on a show and have them rep-

resented in a favorable way. The game metaphor helps to frame the contact with journalists in a positive light and to keep the relationship constructive and amicable. Most of them see battle elements in the contact with journalists, but only use words like “battle” or “fight” when they refer to negative experiences, for example if someone cheated and betrayed them, which in most cases means that they violated agreements on what to discuss and how.

PR advisors, however, tend to downplay their own role, claiming that they can only set good conditions, but how the talk actually develops is out of their reach. They describe themselves as a kind of mediator between the politicians and the programs, but their descriptions of their role in the negotiations reveals that they are actually powerful players. They have the power to turn down programs and they do so without asking “their” politician at all, especially when they have been working for them for quite some time and know them well. This observation was confirmed implicitly in the interviews with politicians who referred to their PR advisors for details about the negotiations, they themselves knew little about. Talk show producers even explained explicitly that they cannot deal with most politicians without the interference of PR advisors.

So the competition game repertoire also serves as legitimization of PR advisors’ position in the field. Only players know how to play according to the unwritten rules. It seems as if they like the excitement of the game and seek out the boundaries without violating the rules, which makes it sound more harmless than it may actually be.

## **Stage Play Repertoire: Performing on Stage**

### *Need of cooperation*

The second repertoire found was a variation on the play theme: the stage play metaphor. In contrast to a competitive game, with winners and losers, performing a play consists of close collaboration by the players. Only if all players contribute will the play—the television interview—appear convincing and authentic. PR advisors therefore stress the friendly and cooperative contacts and the positive effects of good agreements. When the conditions are clear, they feel, conversation can unfold in a relaxed manner.

“It’s in no one’s interest if five minutes of a program is, like, come on, tell me, and that the politician says no all the time. Until the moment he has to say, we agreed not to do this. This is the worst thing that can happen in a program, also for the producers.” (OL4)

PR advisors emphasize the mutual interest they share with journalists, namely an interesting appearance on television, so they can both benefit from a good show. Therefore, they would rather not describe the negotiations about talk shows as a struggle, but as cooperation with the producers, as part of the game. They believe that they can add to the shared goal by suggesting topics, guests, images, and anything else concerning the interview.

“We always try to think along with the producers, like, maybe it would be nice to show this video-bite of the prime minister, or this newspaper heading in the background. We think along as far as possible. Producers have to decide themselves what they are going to do with it.” (OL3)

Behind the scenes they also cooperate in sharing background information. This is especially needed in the case of talk shows, because they do not cover every news story, but are looking for stories and opinions behind the news that have not yet been told in news or current affairs shows. All agree that mutual trust is necessary for this kind of off-the record talk. Only if PR advisors and journalists know and trust each other, are they willing to share confidential information. If this is the case, journalists may also ask advice about guests from other parties or for more background information on difficult political topics.

PR advisors like to frame this as a friendly turn and normal part of their job. They do admit, however, that the information is not totally free of charge. They do not ask to be rewarded right away, but would eventually certainly like to get media attention. So the investment is expected to pay back at some point. In return, they also receive information on how the shows are produced. They use these informal meetings to get to know the programs and their interests, which helps them to come up with interesting topics at the right time and to prepare their politicians adequately.

“People sometimes ask whether this is a healthy situation. I think that this is totally normal, because you simply have a mutual dependency. It is just ordinary cooperation. So, of course you listen to each other. I cannot one-sidedly impose my wishes on a producer, and likewise they cannot do this to me. Because if they did so, the collaboration would evaporate and to those programs, as well as to us, long-term collaboration has proven very helpful.” (G4)

So sharing background information not only helps to spread own viewpoints, but is also seen as an investment in long-term relationships and creating a better performance.

*Staged authenticity created by well-prepared improvisation*

Another aspect that appears in the use of the stage play repertoire is the opportunity of an authentic appearance, which makes a talk show more attractive for this purpose than other news programs. All PR advisors emphasize the need to appear to be a normal person and stress that they are not trying to create this impression on purpose.

“I have a pretty simple idea about it, namely to let the politician be himself. I don’t believe in character make-overs and such things. You have your own life experience, which makes you authentic. You cannot build this based on things you think up.” (OL2)

Talk shows are seen as a good venue to stress such features or at least create an opportunity to show them off. The informal talk allows for jokes, witty remarks, and chatting with other guests, which gives politicians the chance to remark on personal ideas, hobbies, or interests. Although PR advisors attempt to know as exactly as possible how formats work and what shows prefer, they do not always comply with them, as they also have to guard the politician’s reputation. Therefore they have to find an equilibrium between showing politicians to be likeable, witty persons and presenting them as serious politicians with profound knowledge of their topic. An appearance on a talk show is considered successful when this balance is struck and the politician succeeds in adjusting to the format.

“You have to be at a distance, but simultaneously emotion-wise, you have to be close, because you have to communicate about decisions and you want people to understand what you do and why. This is a paradox, which I find very difficult. Perhaps the most difficult task for us. And a talk show is maybe the best way to solve this

paradox. There both things come together.” (G4)

When talking about practical preparations, they admit their attempts to control as many elements of the shows as possible, and to train their politicians to engage accordingly, revealing the real nature of their work. This shows how they interpret authenticity. It is not so much about real spontaneity (then the reaction to an unexpected surprise could be seen as the purest form of authenticity), but a well-orchestrated presentation of the politician.

As in a stage play, only a well-orchestrated performance allows viewers to forget that they are watching a show and lets them believe what they are seeing. PR advisors believe that thorough preparations, training, and experience enable politicians to be relaxed, feel confident, and therefore appear authentic, simply because they do not have to worry about all the possible things that could occur and how they should react to them. The better prepared they are, the more authentic their performance on stage will be, PR advisors argue; like an actor who knows his role so well that he does not have to think about his lines anymore, but is able to improvise. It is this improvisation, based on the total mastery of the role, that makes the performance convincing.

“They have to be trained. Training sometimes has a strange connotation, as if we are spin doctors who change the characteristics of a person. We don’t, but we do make sure that they are well-prepared, like a football player who starts the game well-rested and with a clear goal in mind.” (G4)

On the other hand, they emphasize that too much planning would be counterproductive, as the viewer would recognize it to be a staged play. This means that they are aware of the possible negative conno-



tation of this repertoire. If viewers recognized the rehearsed character of the performance, they would not consider it real anymore.

“We don’t want to know the questions and they won’t give them, which is fine. There are already more preparations than the viewer knows of, but the conversation must not become a stage play.” (OL3)

This is easy for PR advisors to claim, as they do not have any other choice. Journalists would never give away the concrete questions and detailed preparation of the interview. PR advisors seem to use the stage play repertoire to explain their close relations with journalists, and to solve the paradox between extensive preparations and an authentic appearance. In their view, there is no contradiction between them, instead, preparation is needed to show the politician in full, with all his or her personal characteristics and ideas. Only if this image is convincing will the viewer believe and trust the politician’s story. So training techniques, preparing jokes, or personal anecdotes can help to let the politician perform well in the improvisation play with the journalist. Talk shows are the perfect place for this combination. They are strictly directed and planned, but do also allow and even encourage improvisation when conversing.

## **Conclusion**

This study asked which interpretive repertoires political PR advisors use to describe the preparations for and negotiations with talk shows. Questioning PR advisors about how they perceive their own role provided insights into the perception and self-perception of an often hidden group in the process of media relations. Without saying so explicitly, the use of two interpretive repertoires, i.e. competition game and stage play, shows that competition and cooperation are

not necessarily mutually exclusive. Using the play metaphor, Dutch PR advisors frame the relations and negotiations in a more friendly way than found in the brutal and fierce struggle known from US and UK examples (Franklin 2003; Mark 2006). PR advisors navigate between both interpretive repertoires to legitimize their daily performance and to deal with apparent contradictions in their work.

While our findings confirm general assumptions about the PR advisors' main task, controlling the image of their politicians in the media, the intertwining of the two aspects of play - competition game and stage play - offers a fruitful notion to conceptualize journalist-source relations in general. They bridge a seeming contradiction between an antipodal and symbiotic relationship that often remains unexplored in research on sourcing (Broersma, Den Herder, and Schohaus 2013). In line with previous studies on PR and journalism (Jones 1996; Franklin 2003; Ingham 2003; Davis 2013), our study shows that PR advisors are key players in all preparations and negotiations with television talk shows. They are the ones who are well-acquainted with the formats and who try to anticipate their characteristics when preparing "their" politicians, who have to rely on that knowledge. The results also confirm findings of earlier studies regarding major differences in the hierarchy between programs and politicians. Popular programs have better positions for negotiation, as do high-ranking politicians (De Haan et al. 2013). The need for mutual trust, often mentioned by journalists (Prenger et al. 2011; Kee 2012), has also been confirmed by the PR advisors of politicians.

Analyzing the relationship between politics and journalism from their perspective shows how negotiations about politicians' appearances in talk shows are balanced between conflicting and common interests. On the one hand, this could be due to the multiple-party system in the Netherlands, which forces parties to cooperate frequently and therefore to remain on speaking terms with other parties, but also with journalists, whom they will always need for me-

dia attention, whether they happen to be in power or in opposition. On the other hand, the conjunction of both repertoires also offers a means for PR advisors to stress their role as mediators between journalists and politicians, being the ones who help to enhance media appearances, provide information, and therefore play a decisive role in creating a good show. The game metaphor helps them to brush aside or downplay conflicts of interest, as they are part of the game, which is generally played fairly, according to them. Although they frame themselves as serving the politicians (and sometimes even the journalists), they like to emphasize their knowledge about media in general, and in this particular case about talk shows. They claim to know what information is needed and how it should be framed in certain media. Through this, PR advisors disguise their own interest as the objectively best way to inform citizens.

Journalists, PR advisors, and politicians agree that authenticity and an honest story sell best (De Vries 2014). At the same time this authenticity is always staged, because the politician's story is constructed and entirely thought through beforehand. PR advisors use both repertoires to legitimate the extensive preparations as necessary, either as training for a competitive game or as a rehearsal for an authentic performance. Dutch talk shows, which successfully merge information and entertainment, are seen as the perfect place to show this staged authenticity, creating the impression of a spontaneous, trustworthy, and convincing appearance not despite but just thanks to thorough preparation.

In this light, their fear of surprises is logical. They might interfere with and even damage the carefully prepared image of the politician. Therefore, those surprises might be a key for talk shows to limit the power of political PR. Researchers as well as journalists have repeatedly stated their concerns about the independence of journalism, which they think is under pressure through the close contacts and even dependency between journalists and PR advisors (Prenger et al.

2011). However, despite close collaboration and thorough preparations, talk shows always contain a certain amount of improvisation, due to interaction between different guests and the host that cannot be predicted. Talk show producers might use this feature of their formats to catch politicians off guard without violating agreements and regain at least some independence in the creation of these bits of spontaneous action.

## Notes

1. The other two are Alea, or chance, i.e. playing a slot machine, and Ilinx, or vertigo, changing perception, i.e. by using drugs.
2. In this article, a single term (PR advisor) has been chosen for the sake of coherence.
3. It should be noted that Dutch talk shows differ from the Anglo-American ones. Whereas Anglo-American daily talk shows, for example, focus on personal stories, social topics, and taboos, with *Oprah* as the most famous example, late-night talk shows in the United States and the United Kingdom are satirical one-man shows, focused on ridiculing daily news and mocking famous guests. Examples of those shows are *David Letterman's Late Night* and *Late Show*, *The Colbert Report* in the United States, or *The Graham Norton Show* in the United Kingdom. Dutch talk shows, be it morning or late-night talk, contain a greater portion of "serious talk." Although they have also been accused of personalization and emotionalization instead of providing hard, critical interviews, especially the public service broadcasting shows try to combine the entertaining character of a talk show with the informative function of public broadcast, discussing daily news topics, and social and cultural matters with a combination of celebrities and more serious guests, like politicians (Van Dijk, Nahuys, and Waagmeester 2005; Wijffes 2009).



